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ABSTRACT

The current study of death and dying is an example of constant change and development in academic disciplines. While the discussion of death in time of crisis is hard, if not impossible, youthful undergraduates find this topic to be of considerable interest. For them, a course can be organized effectively as a small and intimate seminar, which includes the following phases of study: (1) exploring attitudes and appropriate language through introductory readings and discussion; (2) discovering community activities and resources through interviewing related professionals; and (3) presenting specialized reports on topics of choice such as suicide, children's view, euthanasia, and more philosophical matters. Such a university study begins to branch out into an entire program of Death Education as it is directed toward nursing staffs, public school teachers, professional teams, and students interested in practical applications of philosophy. (Author)

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THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF DEATH AND DYING

Abstract of Paper by Edward W. Amend, University of Northern Iowa

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THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF DEATH AND DYING

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American education seems to forget easily its involvement in history. Every kind of study from its smallest element to the largest discipline is influenced by development and context. Subject matter is a subdivision of what scholars perceive the society needs. A course is a response to some form of human curiosity. Even disciplines are a product of their times, and many of the current disciplines within the university are only recent entries into the lengthy history of the university. Perhaps it takes a theologian to remember best how transitory are the important claims of any one discipline. Once we were princes who served the queen of the sciences. Yet we have been humbled, perhaps appropriately, but in that process we have also been edified. We know that what is called a "traditional discipline of the university," no matter which of the "-ologies" it might be, is only another product in the lengthy development of human civilization and is effective only to the extent it responds to the context of human need in which it meets itself.

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All this is a background for why and how such a subject as death and dying is to be studied at this point of American history and in the setting of the university curriculum. I first found out about this opportunity when I tried to teach a general course on tragedy. The students were not really interested in the literary and dramatic forms which interested me. Instead, they seemed preoccupied with the facts of death that lay just on the other side of the tragic encounter. I decided there was another reality besides patterns of plot and character that was worthy of investigation.

My own professional background also was influential. Before returning

to graduate school and undertaking a second career in higher education, I spent ten years as a pastor. Since most of my work was with younger families not far from here, as a matter of fact, in the Southwest, I was not faced with the prospect often of giving attention to dying patients. But when I was I discovered something strange. In the process of coming to terms with a serious illness that is about to end a life, there are great difficulties in talking about death. By its very imminence, death overwhelms the power of speech. I remember, for example, a special ministry that I carried out for one of my parishioners who was in the process of dying from cancer. With the exception of two or three occasions when I had to spend short periods of time at meetings out of the city, I visited him daily. We struck up a remarkable friendship, and if he was sleeping he had the nurses write a note and pin it to his bedsheet indicating, "Ed, if you come while I'm sleeping, wake me up." And yet, in part because of the wishes of his family to avoid the subject and in part because of my own lack of courage, not once did he and I talk about his dying. The closest we came was in our last visit when we discussed the perfect fishing trip he and I could imagine, which was our common idea of what heaven should be like, if there is one.

The readiness of college students to speak about death, the difficulty to introduce the subject in the hospital setting--both of these were but preparations for another development leading toward the academic study of death and dying. That was a discovery made by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross that many seriously ill patients were ready to talk about their experience. They felt privileged even to be regarded as instructors of those they were leaving behind, and in the interviews which Dr. Kübler-Ross and her team had at the University of Chicago Hospitals, she and the others learned that for

the dying the subject did not have to remain a taboo. It could indeed be rationalized. Death could be described as having stages that vary from person to person and yet have some common features. The work of Kübler-Ross in American society was the breakthrough. American culture seemed ready to talk about death, and the colleges and universities were the appropriate place to engage first upon that discussion.

To illustrate my own experiences with the academic study of death and dying, I would like to describe general outlines of the course I have taught four times since 1972 and for which our institution is starting to build up a staff, not only for offering the course once a year but toward an every-semester schedule. I give you brief information about the course: objectives, organization, results, and prospects for the future.

I have had to use the expression, "open" objectives, since as a seminar a lot of the learning depends greatly on the mix of students that present themselves each semester. I am primarily interested in communication. How can persons for whom death is not imminent learn to express their ideas about it? In bringing out their own ideas, how can they find it possible to give appropriate consideration to victims, that is, the terminally ill, the suicidal, or the grieving. How can those ideas and considerations henceforth affect the shape of their own lives? Is it possible, that is, to discover the extent to which dying is a part of living?

One thing for certain I am beginning to see is that the objectives in this kind of course really cannot be expressed as assertions. There is something extremely inaccurate and even presumptuous to appear to be able to define precisely all that can be known about the end of life and the loss experienced by the dying or the surviving in that end. So I am starting to think that the "open" objectives that I used to believe were just part

of a course in its early stages of experimentation will really have to be a continued feature of that course. Much we do not know and perhaps will never be able to know. But we can try to find out. Is it possible to discover positive features about the dying experience? Is dying not really something that happens to us at the end of life, but rather an aspect of all of living? Can language and the proper use of language through the expression of accurate words and appropriate ideas give us some limited control through anticipation of the dying we all will have to face? In learning how to come to terms with our own inevitable dying, can we then be freed from those anxieties which preoccupy us and inhibit our direct help to others? And finally: In a world in which we find it so easy to turn to specialists when we have specialized needs, in the mutual caring made necessary by the intrusion of death and dying, do we discover a way in which inevitably we must be counselors, even non-professional counselors, of each other? No one seems to have finally and ultimately the responsibility to care for those who face death and are stricken by the loss it causes. Therefore, like the old cowboy standing by the grave of his buddy, we too must say the words we know, even though they're not the proper ones and grammar fails us as the words stumble out. But we are the ones who are there, and there is no one else.

Obviously, one course cannot meet all those objectives, and so I have really tried to build into the seminar considerable opportunity for the students to exchange ideas among themselves, pay attention to important scholarly articles on the subject, and investigate particular areas in which they themselves would like to know more. Consequently the course is organized into a three-phase pattern. For the first third of the course we learn to talk about the subject, trying to bring into expression the

real content of statements that begin with "When I die" or "The experience I expect in the process of dying . . ." During this unit the class and I move from talking rather abstractly about general community attitudes and the reasons for the subject of death as a taboo. We then make distinctions, largely phenomenological ones, on what death means in all its different guises. Most important reading for this part of the unit is an article by Peter Koestenbaum called "The Vitality of Death." Then we move into an attempt at analyzing the experience of dying, including Kübler-Ross interviews, articles on near-fatal accidents, and analogues that exist in our own experience which help us to imagine what it is to die. We try hard to conceive of the kind of illumination or reconciliation we would wish to have as a result of coming to the end of our lives. Finally, we deal with human relationships at the time of death, how it is we expect dying persons to want companionship without clinging, privacy and solitude without abandonment. This unit is entitled "Attitudes Toward Death and Dying."

The second unit of this course can be described more simply even though in actuality it is more complex. That unit I call "Community Activities and Resources in Relation to Death." Students have the opportunity to invite professionals from our metropolitan area who can give them information on various aspects of care for the dying and the dead. Among these frequently are nurses, physicians and the coroner, clergymen, funeral directors, and other persons having to do with emergency care such as ambulance drivers. I frequently have persons visit and speak to the class who have recently gone through a period of grief. On one occasion a year ago I had a young man speak about the suicide of his father, and during the same class session a father spoke about the death of his teenage son. Orville Kelly from Burlington, Iowa,

the founder of the organization Make Today Count has visited the seminar during two separate semesters. Some members of the seminar have also been able to hear Kübler-Ross speak when she has lectured in Iowa.

The purpose of this unit is to give the students some sense of how their own ideas compare and contrast with the ideas of other persons who have some special responsibility with the dying. Sometimes my students have been extremely critical of the kinds of attitudes expressed by these professionals. At other times they find that they learn a great deal when they hear the views expressed from quite different perspectives than their own. Also, during this phase of the course my students have the opportunity to be planning for the third unit, which is their own specialized research project that they will be developing for oral presentation and as a written term paper.

This third unit is the culmination of the course through individual research projects on a variety of topics chosen by the students. I normally schedule these topics in the form of panel discussions as students choose to speak on similar or related subjects. Every semester we have at least one panel on the subject of suicide. Frequently, in an institution with the teachers-training focus that is our primary mission, several students will want to investigate the special relationships between children and death. Then, in addition, other projects have dealt with violent death, capital punishment, special care of the dead, euthanasia, and other more philosophical topics. During this last of the three units, while I am guiding the students primarily on the kinds of resources available for their study, they are learning a great deal from each other. While it may seem that the class sessions themselves become less my responsibility as the instructor, I find that I spend a considerable amount of time not in preparing myself to lecture or lead the class in discussion but rather in conferences with

individual students, helping them to plan. The purpose of this course, after all, is not to summarize all that can be known about death and dying. It is instead to prepare college students to know how to learn on their own. And if they are to learn to become professionals whose work is related to death and dying, they should be aware how to do the necessary research for that work. Thus the course starts as the creation of a community and ends with "Individual Research Projects" that concentrate on what interests particular students the most and on what they perceive they will need in their future careers.

The results of the seminar have been remarkable in the quality of student research and projects. While the film that I will be showing a number of you later this morning is not a product of this course, it represents a kind of independent study that is simulated by this course. The film itself, called "Deathbed," is the result of a self-forming seminar in the program I direct. The Death and Dying seminar itself has spawned many other occasions of instruction and sharing. While I have tried most of the time to keep the class size small, the course has generated a great deal of discussion far beyond the small numbers of those allowed in the class any particular semester. Since students have to explain to people who question them about taking a course "on death," they stimulate many discussions in the dormitories and elsewhere in the community. I counted one semester that out of a class of eighteen students there must have been twelve who themselves either at work or in a community group taught their own short course for others.

For this purpose, as must be obvious, the course has to remain small. During one semester I let the seminar develop into double the size that I normally had, and I was not satisfied with that result at all. The most

important thing that did not happen was my getting to know the individuals and being able to respond to the levels of understanding that each of them brought to the class. Twenty students is really a maximum, and fifteen I would regard as an optimum. In addition to the type of research that has been encouraged by this course, the class sessions themselves have often had the excitement of drama. I could be more anecdotal than time permits, but if you can imagine someone who has recently lost a family member talking about that experience, you can be aware of how intense the atmosphere can be when persons come to grips with the existence and agony of others.

At this point I can only list some of the prospects that I regard for this type of study. I do believe that public institutions with student bodies of upwards of 10,000 should aim more toward a death education program involving several faculty than merely a seminar that is staffed by one person. Therefore I think that it should aim toward several more specialized courses, and these are some of them: 1) Hospital and nursing home staffs need some greater understanding not only of the kind of care they should give but of their own ideas and the words they use to express those ideas. 2) Public school teachers from the elementary level on up need to know of the kinds of learning opportunities that are occasioned by the event of a death whether it be of a pet, a distant relative, a parent, or a classmate. 3) Professionals of various sorts need to clarify their roles within the community and how in relation to death and dying they may work as a team. Physicians especially need to learn their appropriate role in relationship to other professionals such as nurses, social workers, and clergymen. 4) The general undergraduate student population can find that the study of death and dying is an introduction to many other disciplines related to culture. Philosophy and

poetry are the natural results of an encounter with the idea of dying. Even psychology has its roots in this kind of study, and I believe that it can be deepened by it (as pointed out by Koestenbaum and Aisenberg in The Psychology of Death).

Eventually the study of death and dying should bring us back to some understanding of why death and dying needs to be studied right now in this stage of American culture. Certainly one reason for that need is the heterogeneous society itself and the pluralism of ultimates for people within that society. In addition, we are allowing people to spend many years of their lives in study without really encouraging them to examine the meaning of existence. Trying to come to terms with death may be a means toward a deeper philosophical penetration beneath the egalitarianism of superficiality. While neither philosophy nor theology is unusually attractive to American student populations, study of death is becoming so, and this study can be a way in which students "back into" more basic questions about the nature of human existence and the purposes that can be found within it.

Given the rapid changes which American culture and American education are subject to, I do not expect the study of death and dying to keep its present shape for very long. That really is the next step needed in any new disciplinary endeavor: to imagine what the next phase of the study will be. Perhaps in our sharing experiences and ideas today we shall be able to imagine that next step ahead of us, or if we cannot imagine it, at least we can try to get a firm idea of where we are standing and what we are doing at this point in historical development and given this context of student interest and human need.